# Having a Coke with You

## SUMMARY

The speaker would rather share a Coke with his lover than travel to coastal resort towns in Spain and France or indulge himself to the point of a stomachache in Barcelona. This is because, when dressed in an orange shirt, his lover looks like an improved, cheerful version of the Christian martyr St. Sebastian. There's also the fact that the speaker loves him and gets a kick out of how much his lover loves yogurt. Then there are the vivid orange tulips that surround the nearby birch trees and the way they sneak smiles at each other around statues and other people. When the speaker is with his lover, it's strange to think that anything as motionless, serious, and distastefully changeless as a statue can exist—not when the speaker and his lover are standing right there in front of it, in the pleasant afternoon glow of New York City, their spirits seeming to intertwine like wind moving through glassy tree leaves.

The portraits at the art exhibit they attend don't seem to capture humanity; they look like a bunch of dull paint. The speaker finds himself doubting whether they were worth painting at all.

The speaker stares at his lover's face, which he says he'd rather stare at than any portrait on earth—with the arguable exception of Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*, sometimes. In any case, that painting's in the Frick Collection, which his lover hasn't visited before, so the speaker looks forward to taking his lover on a date there. His lover's graceful body seems to eclipse all of Futurism (an art movement known for its dynamic portrayals of motion). Similarly, when he's at home, the speaker doesn't ponder Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and when he's at rehearsals (for his lover's performances), he doesn't ponder any of the Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo drawings that once bowled him over. As for the Impressionist painters, he wonders: what was the point of their academic study if they never found the right lover to share trees and sunsets with? Moreover, what good was all the research of the sculptor Marino Marini, since he didn't choose the human model for his equestrian sculpture as wisely as the model for the horse?

The speaker feels that all these artists were denied some incredible experience of love. He refuses to take that experience for granted, so he expresses it to his lover.

## THEMES

### LOVE AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

"Having a Coke with You" celebrates the fun, spontaneous, casual side of love. Rather than high drama or intense passion, it focuses on normal experiences shared with that special someone: walking around a city on a warm day, drinking a soda together, and so on. Addressing a "you" whose smallest quirks delight him, the speaker declares that this kind of mundane outing as a couple "is even more fun" than travel and more fulfilling than art. Meanwhile, the poem itself becomes an opportunity to connect and share joy. The poem implies that love makes even simple pleasures wonderful—and that sharing such pleasures is part of what makes love wonderful, too.

From the title on, the poem celebrates the everyday joys rather than the special occasions of love. The speaker (a stand-in for O'Hara himself) announces that "Having a Coke with You"—sharing a simple soda—"is even more fun" than traveling to fancy locales, such as resort towns in France and Spain. Since Coke is often used as shorthand for American culture, this reference implies that it's more fun for this couple to do ordinary things where they are, in New York/the U.S., than to go abroad and seek exotic experiences. They're so in love, they can enjoy themselves just about anywhere, doing just about anything. Similarly, O'Hara praises the most basic traits and quirks of his beloved (his "love of yoghurt," for example) and prefers his looks to the beauty of classic painting and sculpture.

This emphasis on the ordinary frames love as a connection, or communion, so profound that even its humblest moments bring joy. O'Hara feels he and his partner are "drifting back and forth / between each other," as if sharing a supernaturally intimate connection. In a surreal simile, he compares this "drifting" to "a tree breathing through its spectacles," perhaps suggesting that it's too weird and mysterious to understand in normal terms. O'Hara and his partner also smile in "secrecy" around other "people," as if no one else can understand the intimacy between them. In this context, the shared Coke, mundane as it is, represents the *feelings* they share. Drinking it together is a confirmation of their closeness.

The poem, too, becomes an occasion for the same kind of connection. O'Hara calls his love a "marvelous experience" and simply "tell[s]" his partner "about it," rather than hiding behind complex metaphors, personas, or literary games.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-25

## REAL LIFE VS. ART

The speaker of "Having a Coke with You" is a New Yorker with an expert knowledge of fine art. (Since Frank O'Hara worked as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the speaker is clearly the poet!) Despite the abundance of art surrounding him in the city, O'Hara finds that his love for "you" makes even his favorite art seem boring and pointless by comparison. Likewise, his favorite artists seem sad compared to him; he pities them for never finding "the right person," as he has, and feels "they were all cheated of" his own "marvelous experience" of love. The joys of life and love are so powerful, the poem suggests, that they can make even an art connoisseur prefer them to the world's greatest art.

For the speaker, real life and real love put even the best art to shame. As he walks with his beloved, love makes even the creation of art seem pointless. For example, it makes statuary seem "unpleasantly definitive" and paintings look like "just paint," so that "you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them." The speaker (O'Hara) adds, "I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world": his beloved delights and matters more to him than any art. And that's saying something, considering how much he appreciates art! He doesn't completely lose his taste for art; he admits that he still likes Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, for example. But even this painting turns his thoughts back to his beloved, and to the exciting idea of going to museums together.

In the heat of love, O'Hara begins to feel there's something *sad* about art compared to life, as if art were a compensation for the artist's failure to find love and happiness. He finds statues overly "solemn" and wonders of a number of famous artists: "what good does all [their] research [...] do them / when they never got the right person." He suddenly imagines art as a kind of dry, intellectual discipline—a retreat from rather than a celebration of life. With cheerful hyperbole, he decides these artists turned to art because "they were all cheated" of the "marvelous experience" of love, which he refuses to let "go wasted on me."

Ironically, of course, O'Hara himself is creating art by writing the poem. However, he seems to aim for a style that reflects the ideas he's preaching. The poem is anything but "still, "solemn," and "unpleasantly definitive," for instance: it's funny, lively, casual, and barely even punctuated, like a stream of thought captured while it's still in motion.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Line 3
- Lines 6-25

# LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-2

*is even more ...*
*... Gracia in Barcelona*

The title of "Having a Coke with You" flows right into its opening lines, so that, syntactically, they're part of the same sentence. (English-language poets had started to play with this titling effect a generation before O'Hara; one famous example is Marianne Moore's "The Fish.") Thus, "Having a Coke with You" is the subject of a sentence whose very long predicate begins: "is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne / or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona."

These proper nouns refer to places in Spain (San Sebastian, Irún, Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona) and France (Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne). Most are ritzy coastal resort towns, with the exception of Barcelona, a large coastal city in Spain's Catalonia region. The Travesera de Gracia (also spelled *Travessera de Gràcia*) is a street running through the Gràcia district of Barcelona.

- All of these places are tourist destinations that O'Hara himself had visited. In fact, shortly before writing the poem, Frank O'Hara had been on a work trip to Spain. Like many of O'Hara's poems, then, this one is autobiographical.
- The "You" refers to his actual lover at the time, the dancer Vincent Warren (though the poem never mentions him by name, in part due to O'Hara's desire to keep his sexuality ambiguous in the homophobic culture of mid-20th-century America).

In this opening simile, O'Hara declares that the simple act of "Having a Coke with You" is better than visiting all these fancy French and Spanish towns. Later lines make clear that the two lovers are enjoying this Coke while walking around New York City (where both men lived at the time).

Coke is a cheap and classic American product, sometimes used as a symbol of America itself, so this American speaker is suggesting that the simplest possible experience with his lover—drinking an ordinary soda on an ordinary day—"is even more fun" than visiting exotic tourist spots. (The comparison to "being sick to my stomach [...] in Barcelona" sounds counterintuitive—stomachaches usually aren't pleasant!—but O'Hara's implying that he got sick there from overindulging in alcohol, i.e., having *too much* fun.) These days, O'Hara doesn't need fine wine or a fancy destination; staying close to home and sharing "a Coke with You" is romantic enough.

## LINES 3-6

*partly because in ...*
*... people and statuary*

In lines 3-6, O'Hara lists various reasons why simple activities with his lover are so much "fun." His use of repetition (specifically, anaphora) makes this list easy to follow, even as his casual free verse keeps punctuation to a minimum:

> **partly because** in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
> **partly because of** my love for you, **partly because of** your love for yoghurt
> **partly because of** the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches
> **partly because of** the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary

All these "part[ial]" reasons add up to a nuanced emotional picture. O'Hara is attracted to this man for a variety of reasons, not all of which make immediate logical sense. (In fact, O'Hara seems to be suggesting that romantic attraction isn't necessarily logical.)

First, O'Hara claims that his lover is fun to be with because he "look[s] like a better happier St. Sebastian" while wearing his "orange shirt." St. Sebastian was an early Christian martyr who, in Western art, is usually depicted as a shirtless youth pierced by arrows. O'Hara's allusion, then, implies that his lover is as young and beautiful as St. Sebastian, but "better" and "happier" in the sense that he's fully dressed and not in agony.

O'Hara then admits he likes spending time with this man "partly because of my love for you." Having confessed his feelings, O'Hara immediately softens the emotional impact with a mundane, comic detail: "partly because of your love for yoghurt." Notice how O'Hara *doesn't* say, "partly because of **your** love for **me**." It's still early in this relationship, and O'Hara may not be sure of his lover's feelings. What's clear is that even the smallest details about this young man—shirt color, favorite foods, etc.—delight him.

Likewise, even the tiniest details of their shared experience make him happy. As they walk through what seems to be a public park, O'Hara revels in "the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches," which seem to harmonize with his lover's "orange shirt." He also delights in "the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary," as if the two of them know something the rest of the world doesn't (statues included). This kind of private, conspiratorial feeling is often associated with the early stages of love. Notice how O'Hara brings everything in this scene into subtle alignment: the orange shirt matches the orange flowers, his secret smiles match his lover's, and so on.

## LINES 7-10

*it is hard ...*
*... through its spectacles*

Lines 7-10 zero in on a theme that will carry through the rest of the poem: the superiority of life to art.

Following the mention of "statuary" in line 6, O'Hara keeps riffing on the subject of statues. These lovers are drinking their Coke in a park in New York City, so the statues, like the "tulips" and "birches" (lines 5), are part of the poem's setting. O'Hara claims that, when he's with his lover, "it is hard to believe" anything as "still," "solemn," and "unpleasantly definitive" as statues can possibly exist. The two of them are so dynamic and playful, they make the serious, motionless, changeless statues seem ridiculous.

Even their personalities or spirits seem to be actively mingling, as O'Hara notes in an outlandish simile:

> in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth
> between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

What on earth is "a tree breathing through its spectacles"? Maybe the image is simply meant to be surreal or dreamlike, suggesting that whatever's taking place between these two lovers is impossible to understand in ordinary terms. Alternatively, O'Hara could be describing the way wind moves through "a tree," such that it seems to be "breathing through" leaves that are shaped like (or translucent as) "spectacles." Perhaps these men feel as though their spirits, like the "drifting" wind or leaves, are "drifting back and forth" in an intimate, invisible exchange.

Regardless, the simile heightens the contrast between the lovers and the "statuary." Whereas the statues are cold and fixed in place, the lovers are "warm" and in motion ("drifting"). The statues seem "unpleasant[]" and possibly even deathlike, but the lovers feel fully alive.

## LINES 11-16

*and the portrait ...*
*... the first time*

Lines 11-16 continue to juxtapose life and art, again with the suggestion that art is inferior. (At least, if you've got someone to love in your life.)

O'Hara is so in love with his date that, despite being an art connoisseur, he can't focus on or appreciate art. "The portrait show" the couple attends together "seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint"; in other words, these professional paintings are so dramatically inferior to life that they don't seem to capture any real humanity.

Art itself suddenly strikes the speaker as useless—"you

suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did [the portraits]"—because who needs art when you've got love? Unimpressed by the paintings, the speaker adds that "I look / at you." The enjambment after "look" creates a pause suggestive of a long, loving stare.

As if to underline the point, the speaker tells his lover that "I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world." In other words, even the greatest art can't compare to the lover's beauty. But in another comic touch, the speaker admits that his *favorite* portrait, Rembrandt's "*Polish Rider*," might "occasionally" bring the same level of satisfaction. "Anyway," he quickly adds, "it's in the Frick"—that is, the Frick Collection, an art museum in NYC—"which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together for the first time." To sum up: O'Hara thinks his lover is more beautiful than any painting, with the "possibl[e]" exception of Rembrandt's classic portrait of a young man on horseback. Even this portrait immediately gives him a date idea. He's smitten!

But lines 15-16 also suggest that O'Hara is indulging in comic hyperbole; he hasn't *truly* turned his back on art. In fact, he's eager to take his lover to a museum he enjoys, and to share his artistic tastes with someone who may not have developed his own yet.

## LINES 17-19

*and the fact ...*
*... to wow me*

Lines 17-19 develop the idea that O'Hara's lover is more beautiful, wonderful, etc. than anything in the history of art. These lines are structured as a long simile, packed with allusions:

> and the fact that you move so beautifully more or
> less takes care of Futurism
> just as at home I never think of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* or
> at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or
> Michelangelo that used to wow me

"Futurism" was an early 20th-century art movement, based in Italy, known for its innovative depictions of speed, motion, and modern technology. According to O'Hara, his lover "move[s] so beautifully" that he leaves all those Futurist artworks in the dust. (Remember, the poem was written for a ballet dancer named Vincent Warren.)

And in the same way that his lover's movements seem to eclipse Futurism, his experiences with his lover "at home" and at "rehearsal[s]" make other classic art look shabby. For instance, O'Hara "never think[s]" about *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (Marcel Duchamp's famous 1912 modernist painting) at home, where he's presumably been having fun with a sexier figure. Drawings by Leonardo and Michelangelo—Renaissance artists who often drew and painted attractive men—no longer "wow" O'Hara, because he can witness greater beauty at his lover's dance rehearsals.

Again, these comparisons are meant to be outlandish and hyperbolic, reflecting the intense early stages of love.

## LINES 20-23

*and what good ...*
*... as the horse*

Through a series of comparisons in lines 7-19, O'Hara has implied that his lover is more beautiful than all the art in the world—and by extension, that life with someone you love is more fulfilling than any art can be. In lines 20-23, he goes a step further, suggesting that *artists* are sad compared to lovers who enjoy their lives to the fullest.

Posing rhetorical questions without question marks, O'Hara asks:

> and what good does all the research of the
> Impressionists do them
> when they never got the right person to stand near
> the tree when the sun sank
> or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick
> the rider as carefully
> as the horse

The Impressionists were a famous group of 19th-century French painters (including Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir) who depicted light and color in innovative ways. Marino Marini was a 20th-century Italian artist known for his equestrian sculptures and drawings. O'Hara suggests that the "research" informing their art was, in a sense, wasted because they never found "the right person" to celebrate in their work. Marini even paid more attention to the model for his "horse" than the model for his "rider"—or so O'Hara claims. (This allusion could refer to any number of Marini artworks.)

Hyperbolically, O'Hara claims that he's happier than any of these great artists ever were—despite their impressive technical achievements—because he's forged a closer human connection than they ever did. Once again, he suggests that happiness in life (and love) outweighs success in art.

## LINES 24-25

> ...
> *... you about it*

Lines 24-25 end the poem on a joyful note, stressing the close bond between O'Hara and his lover.

Having hyperbolically declared himself happier than any number of great artists, O'Hara muses that they all seem to have been "cheated of some marvelous experience." In context,

he's clearly referring to the "experience" of true love. He then vows that this experience "is not going to go wasted on me, which is why I'm telling you about it." Communication, he seems to imply, is the essence of love. He wants to communicate his happiness to his lover in a casual, generous, uninhibited way—like sharing a bottle of Coke on a warm afternoon.

Many of the lines in the poem have been enjambed, and even those that would be end-stopped under standard grammar rules carry no punctuation at the end. The closing line is no exception; notice the missing period after "it":

> which is not going to go wasted on me which is why
> I'm telling you about it

This effect creates the impression that the poem is still *in motion*—dynamic and unresolved, unlike the "unpleasantly definitive" statues O'Hara criticizes in line 8. Even on the level of punctuation, O'Hara prefers to leave things open-ended, like the ongoing adventure of a love affair.

## SYMBOLS

### COKE

The poem mentions "Coke" only in the title. Still, the Coca-Cola the two lovers share is an important symbol. It's one of the signature products of American consumer culture: a cheap, everyday, commercial beverage. It's a "fun" treat as opposed to a fancy drink, and it's more a childlike pleasure than an adult one (it contains no alcohol).

These qualities make it representative of the kind of simple, innocent pleasure O'Hara's describing in the poem. The two lovers aren't out on a fancy date; they're just walking around and enjoying each other's company.

Coke's status as an American symbol matters here, too. The Pop artist Andy Warhol—one of the defining artists of the 1960s—began his career as a commercial illustrator, and launched his series of commercial product-themed paintings and sculptures by painting Coke bottles. According to arts journalist David Dalton, Warhol did so in part because "the Coke bottle was an American icon so emblematic it could—like Mickey Mouse—stand by itself for the US." Warhol's Coke paintings didn't become as instantly famous as his later Campbell's Soup can paintings, but their reputation rose along with the rest of his work in the early 1960s. O'Hara wrote "Having a Coke with You" in 1960, before Warhol began this series, but didn't publish it in book form until 1965, by which time it seemed to echo the sensibility of Pop Art. (As a modern art curator, O'Hara was keenly attuned to trends in the visual arts, though he wasn't a particular fan of Warhol.)

With all this in mind, the Coke the lovers drink seems symbolic of the place they live in. They choose to enjoy their home country and city rather than seeking excitement by traveling abroad, "to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye," etc. (line 1). Again, they don't need sophisticated drinks or exotic experiences to be happy; they're content to do something simple, unpretentious, and quintessentially American on an average New York day.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne / or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona"

## POETIC DEVICES

### SIMILE

The poem contains several colorful and outlandish similes, which help convey the sheer "fun" of O'Hara's relationship with his lover. For example, O'Hara compares his lover, who's rocking an "orange shirt," to "a better happier St. Sebastian." This line alludes to a famous martyr from the Christian tradition, commonly depicted in Western art as a handsome youth pierced by arrows. St. Sebastian is shirtless in most paintings, so in mentioning the "orange shirt," O'Hara seems to mean that his lover looks as handsome as St. Sebastian while being "better" dressed, "happier," more comfortable, etc.

In a later simile, O'Hara resumes the art theme. He suggests that his lover's graceful body has caused him to lose interest in "Futurism" (an art movement known for its dynamic depictions of motion)—just as being at home (where he himself can have fun in the nude?) makes him forget about the painting "*Nude Descending a Staircase*," and being "at a rehearsal" leaves him indifferent to drawings by "Leonardo" and "Michelangelo." (O'Hara is probably referring, here, to his real-life lover's dance rehearsals, and to these Renaissance artists' numerous depictions of handsome men.) Basically, O'Hara is dating a man so beautiful that even the most beautiful art seems boring by comparison.

The wildest simile occurs in lines 9-10:

> [...] we are drifting back and forth
> between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

This surreal image isn't necessarily meant to make literal sense; O'Hara may be suggesting that his deep feeling of companionship and connection surpasses anything familiar. (Surreal imagery is a notable feature of some modern art.)

A literal interpretation, however, would be that the "tree breathing through its spectacles" refers to a tree sighing in the wind, fluttering leaves similar (in their shape and/or

translucence) to the lenses of "spectacles." (Remember, the setting here is a park full of "birches.") Either way, O'Hara imagines his and his lover's spirits communing—"drifting [...] between each other"—in some strange and ghostly fashion.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian"
- **Lines 9-10:** "we are drifting back and forth / between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles"
- **Lines 17-19:** "and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism / just as at home I never think of the / Nude Descending a Staircase / or / at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me"

## REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of words and phrases—sometimes for emphasis or structural purposes, and sometimes to link O'Hara's thoughts through a kind of associative logic.

One example of structural repetition is the anaphora in lines 3-6:

> **partly because** in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
> **partly because of** my love for you, **partly because of** your love for yoghurt
> **partly because of** the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches
> **partly because of** the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary

Here, repetition briefly organizes the poem's free verse, as the speaker lists some of the reasons why his date with his lover is so "fun." (In the same passage, the repetition in "my **love for** you" and "your **love for** yoghurt" highlights a comic contrast between passionate emotion and simple enjoyment of food. This contrast might also hint that the speaker isn't certain his partner loves *him*.)

Similarly, both lines 17 and 20 begin with "and," as the speaker heaps more praise on his lover and love affair:

> **and** the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism
> [...]
> **and** what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them

In the final line, repetition provides a kind of verbal connective tissue as the speaker excitedly jumps from one thought to the next:

> **which is** not going to go wasted on me **which is** why I'm telling you about it

A more associative type of repetition occurs in lines 1 and 3, as the mention of "San Sebastian" (a resort town in Spain) seems to prompt the thought of "St. Sebastian" (the Christian martyr who is the namesake of the town). Later, the speaker riffs on "statuary" and "portraits," first referring to art he and his lover have been looking at, then unfavorably comparing that art to the lover (or to their romance). More subtly, the mention of "birches" and "a **tree**" in the first stanza (lines 5, 10) sets up the image in line 21: "the right person to stand near the **tree** when the sun sank." All of these repetitions provide touches of continuity in an otherwise loose, free-flowing poem.

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Sebastian"
- **Line 3:** "partly because," "Sebastian"
- **Line 4:** "partly because of," "love for," "love for"
- **Line 5:** "partly because of"
- **Line 6:** "partly because of," "statuary"
- **Line 8:** "statuary"
- **Line 10:** "tree"
- **Line 11:** "portrait"
- **Line 14:** "portraits"
- **Line 17:** "and"
- **Line 20:** "and"
- **Line 21:** "tree"
- **Line 25:** "which is," "which is"

## JUXTAPOSITION

Much of the poem juxtaposes life and art—and suggests that life is far superior, at least when graced with love.

Lines 6-10, for example, favorably compare the two living lovers (the speaker and "you") to the "statuary" in the park they're walking through. Whereas the statues are "still," "solemn," and "unpleasantly definitive," the lovers are so restlessly full of life that they seem to be "drifting back and forth / between each other." The speaker likens the pair of them to "a tree breathing": something vital and organic, not cold and motionless, like statuary stone.

The speaker builds on this theme in lines 11-19, claiming that his lover's face is more bewitching "than all the portraits in the world" (with one possible exception); that his lover's grace is more arresting than pretty much anything in the 20th-century art movement called "Futurism"; and that his lover makes him forget about famous paintings and drawings by the likes of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Marcel Duchamp. Once again, life is superior to art; the beauty of the speaker's lover exceeds anything artists have been able to capture.

Finally, lines 20-25 suggest that even the *practice* of art is pitiful

compared to the enjoyment of life. O'Hara claims to feel sorry for all the artists who immersed themselves in "research" rather than finding, like him, the "marvelous experience" of love.

**Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**

- Lines 6-25

## ENJAMBMENT

None of the lines in the poem are obviously end-stopped; all are left unpunctuated and open-ended. Many are enjambed as well, stretches grammatical phrases seamlessly across line breaks.

In general, this effect adds to the poem's joyful sense of freedom and openness. Without any kind of anchoring punctuation, the lines seem to drift here and there, much like the spirits of the two men "drifting back and forth / between each other" (lines 9-10). Even the last line of the poem is left unpunctuated, as if O'Hara doesn't want to bring the fun to a complete stop.

Enjambment can also emphasize words and phrases that occur just before or after the line break. Besides "drifting back and forth" in line 9, an example of this effect is the emphasis on "look" in line 13:

> I look
> **at** you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world

The pause after "look" suggests that this is a *long* look. The reader gets the sense that O'Hara is really *gazing* at his lover's beauty, the way one might gaze at "portraits" or other paintings.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 7-8:** "still / as"
- **Lines 8-9:** "it / in"
- **Lines 9-10:** "forth / between"
- **Lines 13-14:** "look / at"
- **Lines 14-15:** "world / except"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Frick / which"
- **Lines 18-19:** "or / at"
- **Lines 20-21:** "them / when"
- **Lines 22-23:** "carefully / as"
- **Lines 24-25:** "experience / which"

## ALLUSION

The poem makes a number of allusions to famous and respected works of Western art. These references stem from the poet's expertise in the visual arts; O'Hara worked first at the front desk, then as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

First, O'Hara compares his lover, wearing an "orange shirt," to "a better happier St. Sebastian." In the Christian tradition, St. Sebastian is a martyr (3rd century CE) who was first shot with arrows, then bludgeoned to death. A popular subject throughout the history of Western art, he is often depicted as a handsome youth with torso and limbs pierced by arrows. He's also typically depicted as shirtless, so O'Hara's mention of the "orange shirt" suggests that his lover looks as young and handsome as St. Sebastian while being "happier" and more comfortable.

Later, O'Hara claims that *The Polish Rider*, a painting by Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn), is the only portrait in the world that can "possibly" compare to his lover's beauty. Likewise, he claims that the beautiful "move[ments]" of his lover (the dancer Vincent Warren) effectively put all of "Futurism" to shame. ("Futurism" was an early 20th-century art movement, based in Italy, that sought to capture a sense of dynamic motion in painting and sculpture.)

He adds that drawings by "Leonardo or Michelangelo"—that is, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarotti, the two most famous artists of the Italian Renaissance—no longer "wow" him when he's "at a rehearsal." This line probably refers to Warren's dance rehearsals; again, the implication is that even the greatest works of art can't compare to O'Hara's living, beautiful lover.

The final allusions suggest that even the *creators* of these great works, legendary as they may be, seem sad in light of the happiness he and his lover share. He pities the "Impressionists" (a famous group of late 19th-century French artists) because, unlike him, "they never got the right person" to share a sunset with. Similarly, he feels that "Marino Marini," a 20th-century Italian artist famed for his equestrian sculptures, "didn't pick the rider as carefully / as the horse": that is, Marini knew more about animals than humans (and by extension, human love).

O'Hara implies that all these artists "research[ed]" their models carefully but lacked an understanding of authentic human connection. He concludes that they were "cheated" of his own "marvelous experience" of love, which he aims to convey through his own art—namely, the poem itself.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian"
- **Lines 14-15:** "I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world / except possibly for the / Polish Rider / occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick"
- **Lines 17-23:** "and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism / just as at home I never think of the / Nude Descending a Staircase / or / at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me / and what good does

> all the research of the Impressionists do them / when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank / or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as carefully / as the horse"

## VOCABULARY

**Irún** (Line 1) - Another coastal town in the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain.

**San Sebastian** (Line 1) - A coastal resort town in the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain. Also written *San Sebastián* (or *Donostia–San Sebastián*).

**Hendaye** (Line 1) - A seaside resort town in southwestern France.

**Biarritz** (Line 1) - Another seaside tourist destination in southwestern France.

**Bayonne** (Line 1) - Another coastal city in southwestern France.

**Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona** (Line 2) - The Travessera de Gràcia is a street in the city of Barcelona, Spain. ("Travesera" is an older spelling.)

**St. Sebastian** (Line 3) - A martyr in the Christian tradition, widely depicted in Western art as a handsome young man pierced with arrows.

**Fluorescent** (Line 5) - Very bright, like a fluorescent lamp.

**Statuary** (Line 6, Line 8) - A collective term for statues.

**Definitive** (Line 8) - Permanently defined; fixed in its final form.

**Spectacles** (Lines 9-10) - Can mean two things:

- Eyeglasses.
- Striking performances or exhibitions.

O'Hara might mean either or both; the **simile** here ("like a tree breathing through its spectacles") is deliberately surreal and ambiguous.

**The Polish Rider** (Lines 14-15) - The *Polish Rider* is a famous painting (c. 1665) of a young man riding a horse. It's usually attributed to Rembrandt (1606-1669).

**The Frick** (Lines 15-15) - The Frick Collection is a museum in New York City, named after its founder, industrialist Henry Clay Frick.

**Futurism** (Line 17) - An early 20th-century Italian art movement known for its dynamic depictions of motion and modern technology.

**Nude Descending a Staircase** (Lines 18-18) - *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) is a famous painting by the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), combining elements of the Futurist and Cubist movements.

**Rehearsal** (Line 19) - Probably meaning a dance rehearsal; the poem was inspired by the dancer Vincent Warren.

**Leonardo** (Line 19) - Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was a famous artist of the Italian Renaissance.

**Michelangelo** (Line 19) - Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564) was a famous painter, sculptor, and poet of the Italian Renaissance.

**Impressionists** (Line 20) - Members of the late 19th-century French art movement known as Impressionism, whose painters depicted light, color, and movement in novel ways.

**Marino Marini** (Lines 22-23) - A 20th-century Italian sculptor (1901-1980) known for his equestrian statues.

**Marino Marini** (Lines 22-23) - Many of Marini's works feature horses and riders, so this could refer to a number of sculptures, drawings, etc. A likely candidate is Marini's sculpture *Horse and Rider* (1942), featured at the Museum of Modern Art, where O'Hara worked.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Having a Coke with You" contains 25 lines of free verse, arranged into two stanzas (lines 1-10 and lines 11-25). The second stanza contains two mid-line "drops" (lines 12-13, "you suddenly [...] I look," and lines 23-24,
"as the horse [...] some marvelous experience"), where the dropping and indenting of text effectively marks the end of a sentence/thought without punctuation. These drops also mark a kind of line break, but they are not stanza breaks.

The poem's lack of meter and rhyme scheme—as well as its long, unpunctuated, heavily enjambed lines—reflect O'Hara's preference for a fast-moving, spontaneous style. He wanted his poems to sound natural, freewheeling, and emotionally urgent, not overly schooled in traditional technique. In his essay "Personism: A Manifesto," he famously wrote:

> [...] I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

In fact, the poem is so dynamic and breathless that its title flows straight into its first line. "Having a Coke With You" becomes the subject of the very long sentence for which "is even more fun," etc. serves as the predicate. It's as if O'Hara's wasting no time before charging ahead—even the title doesn't stand alone, or stand still!

## METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning that it has no meter. Its long, heavily enjambed, largely unpunctuated lines convey the breathless excitement of love. Rather than carefully measuring its words, the poem seems to ramble on purpose, like the two men rambling (as in walking aimlessly) around the city. Its thoughts drift unpredictably one into the next, like the men "drifting back and forth / between each other" (lines 9-10). A more formally constructed, rhythmically regular poem would have a harder time conveying such spontaneous "fun" (line 1).

Additionally, O'Hara is eager to share his "marvelous experience" of love in a way that breaks from artistic tradition (lines 24-25). His loose, freewheeling verse style signals an irreverence toward the traditions of English-language poetry as well as visual art.

## RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Having a Coke with You" has no meter or rhyme scheme. Its style strives for speed, spontaneity, and fluidity (by contrast with the disagreeable "still[ness]" of "statuary," lines 7-8). The strictness and regularity of a rhyme scheme would have clashed with this dynamic, unpredictable style.

O'Hara, during this phase of his career, also linked metrical and rhyme patterns with an old-fashioned cultural worldview. As he put it in his famous "Personism" manifesto, "I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures." His embrace of "modernist" techniques in poetry—including irregular rhythms and general rejection of rhyme—fit with his occupation as a modern art curator and a champion of innovation in the arts more generally.

# SPEAKER

As in many of Frank O'Hara's most famous poems, the speaker of "Having a Coke with You" is clearly O'Hara himself. The poem's details are firmly rooted in his own life; for example, the speaker evidently lives in "New York" City (line 9), where he regularly visits the "Frick" Collection (lines 15-16), a Manhattan art museum. These things were also true of O'Hara, who worked as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Several of the place names mentioned in lines 1-2 refer to a work trip he had recently taken to Spain, where he researched modern Spanish art for a MoMA exhibit.

The speaker's voice is warm, playful, and confiding as it speaks in the second person: again, typical features of O'Hara's style in general. In his 1959 "Personism" manifesto, a kind of cheeky artist's statement, O'Hara described his approach like this:

> It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.

Through the layers of play and irony, the statement suggests that O'Hara wanted his poems to sound personal and immediate, as if spontaneously spoken to a loved one, and to capture the kind of love he would normally communicate directly to that other person. In this case, he's addressing a romantic partner: a "you" whom he's in love with, as he casually confesses in line 4. In real life, "you" was the dancer Vincent Warren, whose occupation O'Hara subtly alludes to in line 17 ("the fact that you move so beautifully").

# SETTING

The poem is set in New York City, where O'Hara lived, work, and set many of his best-known poems. The speaker (O'Hara) mentions the "warm New York 4 o'clock light" in line 9, and "the Frick," or Frick Collection, in line 15. The Frick is an art museum on Manhattan's Upper East Side, which O'Hara clearly knows well and is looking forward to visiting with his lover ("thank heavens you haven't gone to [it] yet so we can go together for the first time," line 16). Today, their walk seems to have taken them to one of New York's public parks, as O'Hara mentions "tulips," "birches," "statuary," etc.

For many people, New York is a tourist destination, but for O'Hara, it was home. In the poem, he declares that "it's even more fun" to stick around his home city, drinking a Coke and walking around with his lover, than to go on fancy excursions to France or Spain ("San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye," etc., lines 1-2). In fact, many of O'Hara's poems from around this era highlight the "fun" side of New York—the joy he took in the sights, sounds, and people of his city. A number of those poems are also connected to the "you" who inspired this poem: the dancer Vincent Warren, who danced for a time with New York's Metropolitan Opera Ballet.

In general, O'Hara defined himself as very much an urban, rather than a pastoral, poet. In his book *Meditations in an Emergency*, he claimed to get "all the greenery" he needed from public parks:

> One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.

# CONTEXT

## LITERARY CONTEXT

Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) was one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century. Along with his friends John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, he was a leading light of the poetry movement that critics came to call the New York School.

The New York School poets valued improvisation, formal experimentation, urbane wit, and a style combining sophisticated allusions with American vernacular and pop culture references. In their embrace of both "high" and "low" culture, they sometimes resembled "Pop" artists such as Andy Warhol, who were part of the same generation and broader New York arts scene. In fact, O'Hara, in his day job as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), was an expert on the visual arts. He draws extensively on that body of knowledge in this poem, which refers to "statuary," "portraits," "drawing," and various individual artists and movements.

Composed in 1960, "Having a Coke with You" is the most celebrated of the love poems O'Hara wrote for the dancer Vincent Warren, his lover from 1959 through 1966 (the year of O'Hara's death). Other poems in this vein include "Les Luths" and "Steps," which famously ends: "oh god it's wonderful / to get out of bed // and drink too much coffee / and smoke too many cigarettes / and love you so much." Many of these poems were collected in the volumes *Lunch Poems* (1964) and *Love Poems (Tentative Title)* (1965); "Having a Coke with You" appears in the latter, the last collection published during O'Hara's lifetime.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like many O'Hara poems, "Having a Coke with You" provides a cultural snapshot of mid-20th-century America, including in its references to the consumer products "Coke" and "yoghurt."

Coca-Cola is among the most famous of all American consumer products. First sold in 1886, it came to dominate the international soft-drink market in the 20th century and was an iconic brand by 1960, when O'Hara wrote the poem. Some artists of the period, including the Pop Art legend Andy Warhol, came to see it as a symbol of America or even of democracy itself. In his book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1975), Warhol claimed:

> You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.

In fact, Warhol began his foray into what became known as Pop Art by painting Coke. As the arts journalist David Dalton explained, he chose this subject because: "[T]he Coke bottle was an American icon so emblematic it could—like Mickey Mouse—stand by itself for the U.S." O'Hara, a MoMA curator keenly attuned to trends in modern art and culture, seems to use Coke here as a similar symbol of everyday American life. It's a cheap, ordinary, unpretentious drink, not something fancy and traditionally romantic like fine wine.

As for "yoghurt," it first became commercially available in the U.S. in the early 20th century, though it had been a staple in various Asian and European cultures for millennia. It became a fad health food in 1950s and 1960s America—one reason Warren, a professional dancer watching his figure, might have been a fan.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — Read a brief biography of O'Hara at Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/frank-ohara)
- More on O'Hara's Life and Work — A biography of O'Hara at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frank-ohara)
- The New York School — A brief introduction to the literary movement with which O'Hara was associated. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-new-york-school)
- O'Hara and Vincent Warren — More on the relationship between O'Hara and dancer Vincent Warren, the inspiration for "Having a Coke with You." (https://newyorkschoolpoets.wordpress.com/2017/11/11/vincent-warren-love-of-frank-oharas-life-passes-away-at-79/)
- The Poem Aloud — Watch Frank O'Hara read "Having a Coke with You." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDLwivcpFe8)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER FRANK O'HARA POEMS

- The Day Lady Died

## HOW TO CITE

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